

On Double Predestination

"What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?"

Romans 9:22

Hyper-Calvinism asserts that God predestined the non-elect to go to hell. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin called it reprobation and wrote that, "there could be no election without its opposite, reprobation." He then continued: "Those, therefore, whom God passes by He reprobates . . . because He is pleased to exclude them from the inheritance which He predestines to his children."**[1]**

Double-predestination as it is also known, claims to find support in Romans chapter 9, especially verse 22 which reads: **"What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?"** (Romans 9:22, NASB).

Questions arise over the words, **"vessels of wrath prepared for destruction."** We would certainly concur that there are persons alive in the world today who by their sinful lifestyles evidence that they are the objects and recipients of divine wrath (See Romans 1:18 ff.). God's wrath is expressed in His giving sinners over to sin (Romans 1:24, 26, 26). The debate over double-predestination however, centers on Paul's statement that such persons are **"prepared for destruction."** Questions arise over the word **"prepared."** Who **"prepared"** these persons for destruction or damnation? Is God doing it? Is Satan? Or, are the vessels doing it to themselves? These are interpretations possibly to be inferred from the text.

Like the NFL or NBA drafts, God elects individuals to play for Him. Out of all the families of the earth, He chose Abraham (Romans 9:7a). By divine promise and in deference to Ishmael, God chose Isaac (Romans 9:7b-9). Then defying the right of primogeniture, God chose Jacob over Esau, His selection being made before the twins were born and had done any good works to merit His choice (Romans 9:10-13). Positively and sovereignly, God elects. But in doing so, some infer that God therefore passes over the non-elect, Pharaoh serving as a case in point (Romans 9:17-19). God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4:21; 7:13; etc.). But Exodus records that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15; 8:32; etc.). Of course the question arises, is God fair in doing that to Pharaoh? To this question Paul replies that the Potter can do with the clay whatever He wills. The Potter is free to fashion some vessels for honor and others for dishonor.

In light of Paul's statement of sovereign election in this chapter, one fine commentator concludes in this passage that,

. . . one cannot rescue God from willing the fate of the vessels of wrath. This too was a part of His plan, and thus double predestination cannot be averted."**[2]**

I however, do not see that the text directly stated that God pre-damns people, and here's why. As a participle, the verb "**prepared**" has no subject. There is no specific mention of the agent who works on the "**vessels of wrath.**" Furthermore, it is not clear in the Greek whether "**prepared**" is passive or middle voice. If passive, then the "**vessels**" are being acted on by an outside agent, either God or as some infer, Satan. If the voice is middle, then the vessels are preparing themselves for destruction. Obviously Calvinism favors the view that God does the hardening while Arminianism favors that the preparation is self-inflicted. As in Pharaoh's case, perhaps both aspects of *the preparation* are true. God fits people to be vessels of wrath while those same vessels also do it to themselves. This confluence of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is mysterious.

But the point is that though he could have, Paul did not directly state who hardens the vessels being prepared for destruction. He could have written, *God prepared beforehand vessels of wrath for destruction* (Compare next verse, Romans 9:23, which speaks of "**vessels of mercy . . . He prepared beforehand for glory . . .**"). But the apostle stopped short of that. True, God's preparation may be inferred from the Potter/Clay illustration, but it is only an inference. Because the apostle avoided a direct statement that God prepared vessels of wrath for destruction, mystery surrounds this whole issue of double predestination. So from our perspective, we ought therefore to leave this mysterious matter of double-predestination unresolved to our finite minds.

ENDNOTES

- [1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume II (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Reprint 1972): 226.
- [2] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998): 522.